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An Opportunity Unfulfilled: The Use and Perceptions of Intelligence at the White House

Robert M. Gates

"COLLECTION, PROCESSING and analysis all are directed at one goal—producing accurate reliable intelligence. . . . Who are the customers who get this finished product? At the very top of the list is the President. He is, of course, the Central Intelligence Agency's most important customer." *(CIA Information Pamphlet)* What have the CIA's most important customers had to say about how well it achieves that goal? "I am not satisfied with the quality of our political intelligence," said Jimmy Carter in 1978. "What the hell do those clowns do out there in Langley?" asked Richard M. Nixon in 1970. "CIA Director McCone . . . made recommendations for checking and improving the quality of intelligence reporting. I promptly accepted the suggestions . . . ," explained Lyndon B. Johnson *(Memoirs)*. "During the rush of . . . events in the final days of 1958, the Central Intelligence Agency suggested for the first time that a Castro victory might not be in the interests of the United States," said Dwight D. Eisenhower *(Memoirs)*.

A search of presidential memoirs and those of principal assistants over the past 30 years or so turns up remarkably little discussion or perspective on the role played by directors of central intelligence (DCIs) or intelligence information in presidential decision making on foreign affairs. What little commentary there has been, as suggested by the introductory quotes, is nearly uniformly critical. Similarly, in intelligence memoir literature, although one can read a great deal about covert operations and technical achievements, one finds little on the role of intelligence in presidential decision making. Thus, on both sides of the relationship there is a curious, discreet silence.

Why this dearth of firsthand reflection and evaluation in a major area of foreign affairs and national security history? Partly, perhaps, it is because both parties are still reluctant to discuss what they perceive as sensitive information. Partly, it may be because senior officials have difficulty distinguishing what they learn or see in intelligence reports from other sources of information, ambiguities in the role of intelligence in policy-making, con-

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fusion over what is intelligence, the inclination of senior officials to believe they already knew what they just read in an intelligence report, and the common predilection of senior officials to rely on and recall personal contacts as opposed to the written word or anonymous experts.

This void in the study of presidents, intelligence, and decision making—apart from covert action—is also explained by factors that continue to dominate the relationship between presidents and the CIA and the intelligence community: intelligence collection and assessment are black arts for most presidents and their key advisers, neither adequately understood nor adequately exploited. For intelligence officers, presidential and senior level views of the intelligence they receive and how they use it (or not) are just as unfamiliar, giving rise among intelligence officers to wishful thinking and even conceit. In short, over the years, both the White House and the CIA have failed to maximize the opportunity for better intelligence support for the president and decision making.* This situation is not peculiar to any single administration or particular view of the CIA, but rather is a problem of personal relationships, bureaucratic cultures, and the policy process itself.

Setting the Scene

To understand how intelligence is used and regarded at the White House first requires an understanding of the context in which it is received. The sheer volume of information flowing to the president is staggering. More than 200 agencies seek to draw his attention to programs, proposals, or vital pieces of information. An astonishing amount of their work finds its way to the White House.

Policy agencies such as the Department of State (DoS), the Department of Defense (DoD), the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, and others prepare and send great quantities of paperwork to the president. Most presidents also receive considerable information and analysis on foreign affairs from the media. These sources of information join a river of correspondence to the president from countless consultants, academics, think tanks, political contacts, family, friends, political supporters, journalists, authors, foreign leaders, and concerned citizens. (Lest one thinks such correspondence can easily be disregarded, it is this author's impression that most presidents often attach as much—if not more—credibility to the views of family, friends, and private contacts as they do to those of executive agencies.) In sum, despite the mystique of intelligence for the public, for most presidents it is just one of a number of sources of information. Intelligence reporting must compete for the president's time and attention, and that competition is intense.

It is the responsibility of the White House staff, including the National Security Council (NSC) staff, to impose order on this avalanche of paper and to reduce it to manageable proportions. The NSC alone processes some 10,000 "action" papers a year—not including intelligence analyses or other purely "informational" papers. Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, president Carter's national security adviser, once asked this author to calculate how many pages of reading material he sent to president Carter weekly. The total averaged many hundreds of pages—despite the NSC being among the most disciplined of White House offices with respect to the length and number of items going to the president. These, then, are the first hur-

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dles that intelligence faces: a president with a heavy schedule, inundated by paper and demands for decisions, surrounded by senior assistants who have as a main role trying to keep that president from being overwhelmed by paper, and a president with vast and varied nonintelligence sources on which he also relies and in which he often has considerable confidence.

What Intelligence Does the President Receive?

The president routinely receives only one intelligence document that is not summarized or commented upon by someone outside the intelligence community: the President's Daily Brief (PDB). This is the CIA's principal vehicle for reporting and analyzing current developments for the president. He receives this, usually via his national security adviser every morning, along with a package that has varied little from president to president: a few (3–6) DoS and CIA cables of special significance; occasionally a sensitive intelligence report from the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency, or the National Security Agency (NSA); selected wire service items; DoS or CIA situation reports (rarely both) if there is a crisis abroad; and often NSC and DoS morning cable summaries. Contrary to what is commonly believed, this is the only regularly scheduled package of current intelligence the president receives during the day.

Through the course of the day, however, the national security adviser keeps the president apprised of significant developments overseas and may hand carry especially important cables directly to the president. In a crisis, the flow of information increases. More analyses and reports will be given to the president. He will receive current intelligence orally in meetings with his senior White House, DoS, DoD, and intelligence advisers, as well as from the media—which is often the first source of information. Nevertheless, on a day-to-day basis, apart from the PDB, successive presidents generally have seen only that current intelligence selected by the national security adviser, who works to make that morning package as succinct as he responsibly can.

It was not always this way, even in modern times. Before the Kennedy administration, the president, his national security adviser, and the NSC staff relied on the CIA and DoS to provide incoming cables and information as soon as they were processed. It was an approach that led to considerable competition and redundancy and placed a president at the mercy of the bureaucracies for information.

This system was revolutionized, however, when president Kennedy created the White House Situation Room to which DoS, the NSA, DoD, and the CIA began to provide unevaluated or raw intelligence information electronically—an approach with its own readily apparent shortcomings. (Many a time, an overeager White House aide has run to a president with a dramatic but unevaluated intelligence report and later sheepishly had to return to acknowledge the source was poor or there had been a mistake.)

One result of the establishment of the Situation Room was a significant diminution in the value to the White House of the CIA's and other agencies' current intelligence reporting that to this day the intelligence community has not fully grasped. Only analysis by experienced intelligence specialists lends value to current intelligence reporting provided the

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White House. Even so, because of the Situation Room, intelligence information from abroad is sometimes in the president's hands before reaching the DCI and other senior intelligence officials.

Naturally, the president receives information through channels other than the early morning folder and the occasional cable during the day. For example, most presidents routinely have received current intelligence reports in meetings and the key judgments of important National Intelligence Estimates (and other intelligence as well) either directly from the DCI or through the national security adviser. All DCIs also have briefed the president and his senior advisers both individually and in formal meetings of the National Security Council. Moreover, discussion at such meetings serves to convey information to the president from diverse sources. The president also receives abbreviated versions of intelligence assessments in many policy papers.

Nevertheless, each of the four presidents that this author has observed—Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan—has received an infinitesimal part of published intelligence and only a fraction even of analysis specifically prepared for senior policymakers. This has placed a premium on the President's Daily Brief, on the willingness and ability of the DCI to give important assessments (published or oral) directly to the president, and on the willingness of the national security adviser to forward key intelligence reports to the president. Disinterest or reluctance on the part of a DCI (or national security adviser) to take an activist, even aggressive role in this respect is a severe—even irreparable—handicap to ensuring that intelligence information and assessments reach the president.

What Presidents Think of What They Receive

Perhaps in recognition of how busy presidents are, for years there has been an adage at the White House that the absence of criticism should be regarded as praise. Along these lines, presidential comments on intelligence assessments are so rare that one is understandably tempted to assume satisfaction with what is being received. Regrettably, however, this is doubtful. Many of the infrequent comments are critical, as illustrated at the outset of this article.

The negative perceptions of intelligence of most presidents and their senior advisers while in office or afterward are due to several factors. The first and most significant is failure. Whether Nixon's unhappiness over poor estimates of planned Soviet intercontinental-ballistic-missile deployments or Carter's over failure to forecast the Iranian revolution or untimely upward revisions of North Korean troop strength, these presidents and their advisers—with some justification—believed CIA assessments either contributed importantly to policy disasters or made them vulnerable to later criticism. Moreover, presidents expect that, for what they spend on intelligence, the product should be able to predict coups, upheavals, riots, intentions, military moves, and the like with accuracy. In the early morning hours when the national security adviser must repair to the president's study with the usually bad news about such events, the chief executive will not unnaturally wonder why his billions for intelligence do not spare him unpleasant surprise.

Second, presidents do not like controversy within the executive branch, and they like it even less when it becomes public. Nor do presidents wel-

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come debate over basic facts once they have made a decision. Whether the issue is troublesome assessments on Vietnam (Johnson), the public dispute between the CIA and DoD over whether the SS–9 had multiple reentry vehicles or multiple independently targeted reentry vehicles (Nixon), North Korean force levels (Carter), or the Soviet gas pipeline (Reagan), these and other intelligence debates over technology transfer, arms-control verification, Soviet military spending, Soviet weapon programs, and many more have caused controversy and weakened support for policy. To the extent intelligence information results (in the eyes of the White House officials) in internal government controversy, problems with the Congress, or embarrassing publicity, it will draw presidential ire or, at a minimum, leave the president with unflattering views of his intelligence services.

Third, presidents do not welcome new intelligence assessments undercutting policies based on earlier assessments. Professionals constantly revisit important subjects as better and later information or improved analytical tools become available. When this revisitation results in changing the statistical basis for the U.S. position in the Mutual and Balanced Force Reduction talks, substantially elevating estimates of North Korean forces as the president is pressing to reduce U.S. forces in South Korea, or "discovering" a Soviet brigade in Cuba, it is no revelation to observe that presidents regard those professionals less than fondly.

Fourth, successive administrations have generally regarded with skepticism the growing direct relationship between Congress and U.S. intelligence agencies. In recent years, the provision of great quantities of highly sensitive information and analysis to members of Congress and their staffs has largely eliminated the executive's long-standing advantage of a near monopoly of information on foreign affairs and defense. The flow of information to the Hill has given the Congress a powerful tool in its search for a greater voice in the making of foreign and defense policy vis-à-vis the executive. Presidents cannot be indifferent to the fact that intelligence has provided Congress with that tool and that the White House is nearly helpless to blunt it except in very rare cases.

Fifth, presidents and their national security teams usually are ill informed about intelligence capabilities; therefore, they often have unrealistic expectations of what intelligence can do for them, especially when they hear about the genuinely extraordinary capabilities of U.S. intelligence for collecting and processing information. When they too soon learn the limitations, they are inevitably disappointed. Policymakers usually learn the hard way that, although intelligence can tell them a great deal, it only rarely—and usually in crises involving military forces—provides the kind of unambiguous and timely information that can make day-to-day decisions simpler and less risky. Intelligence officers occasionally encourage such exaggerated expectations by pretending a confidence in their judgments they cannot reasonably justify and by failing to be candid about the quality and reliability of their information and the possibility of other outcomes. Once bitten by an erroneous or misleading intelligence assessment, most White House officials—including presidents—will be twice shy about relying on or accepting unquestioningly another.

Finally, beyond these broad factors affecting the White House–intelli-

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gence community relationship are narrower, more parochial bureaucratic stresses. Often, staff at the White House do not know how to use effectively the vast system they direct. Too often, an intelligence bureaucracy that does not want outside direction offers little help. There is a long-standing perception at the White House that changing the way the intelligence bureaucracies do business—for example, even the presentation of intelligence information to the president—is just too hard, takes too much time and energy, and ultimately yields little.

A useful case study illustrating the simultaneous contribution of intelligence to presidential policy-making and the problems it can bring is the ratification proceedings of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. The capabilities of U.S. intelligence to monitor deployed Soviet INF weapons and associated treaty provisions made the treaty possible in the first place. However, uncertainties in some areas relating to the treaty, disagreements within the intelligence community on the number of nondeployed INF missiles, public disclosure of these disagreements, and exploitation of them in the Senate's ratification proceedings all presented problems to executive policymakers. For the White House, on this issue—as so many others—intelligence was a bittersweet player.

Presidents and other principals over the years have faulted the CIA for lack of imagination in anticipating the needs of the president and for insufficient aggressiveness in keeping itself informed on policy issues under consideration. Neither presidents nor their assistants for national security affairs have felt it their responsibility regularly to keep senior agency officials well informed in this regard, to provide day-to-day detailed tasking, or to provide helpful feedback. For guidance, the CIA thus often has had to rely on what the DCI can pick up in high-level meetings and contacts. The skill and interest of different DCIs in this has varied greatly. Indeed, some DCIs have neither sought nor wanted guidance or feedback from the White House or have sought it on some issues and resisted it on others.

What Is To Be Done?

A president and his national security team (the vice president, the secretaries of state and defense, and the national security adviser) should view intelligence as an important asset in foreign-policy making and—despite recent improvements—should be prepared to devote more time to working with the DCI to provide useful guidance and direction to the collection and analysis efforts of CIA and the rest of U.S. intelligence. Contrary to the view of those who are apprehensive over a close relationship between policymakers and intelligence, it is not close enough. More interaction, feedback, and direction as to strategy, priorities, and requirements are critical to better performance. This can be accomplished without jeopardizing the independence and integrity of intelligence assessments and judgments.

There has been progress in the last 10 years, though much more can be done. The Carter and Reagan administrations have worked constructively at a high level to inform the CIA of the analytical needs of the president and to advise the agency of perceived shortcomings in collection and analysis.

In 1978 Brzezinski sent a memorandum to then DCI Stansfield Turner that made the following points:

- Greater attention needs to be paid

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to clandestine collection targeted on the thinking and planning of key leaders or groups in important advanced and secondary countries, how they make policy decisions and how they will react to US decisions and those of other powers.

- Political analyses should be focused more on problems of particular concern to the US government. Too many papers are on subjects peripheral to US interests or offer broad overviews not directly linked to particular problems, events or developments of concern to the US government.
- There needs to be greater attention to the future. More papers are needed that briefly set forth facts and evidence and then conclude with a well-informed speculative essay on the implications for the future: "We expect and hope for thought-provoking, reasonable views of the future based on what you know about the past and present. . . . Analysts should not be timorous or bound by convention."

After the Iranian Revolution, the Carter White House took other steps to ensure better communication of intelligence needs. The Political Intelligence Working Group (the deputy national security adviser, the under secretary of state for political affairs, the deputy director of central intelligence, and later the under secretary of defense for policy) was established at the White House to organize remedial action in response to the president's November 1978 note criticizing political intelligence. The group interpreted its charter broadly and worked to improve and better focus field reporting by DoS, CIA, and attaches; to resolve bureaucratic impediments to good reporting; and to tackle other problems in order to improve collection and analysis and make intelligence more responsive. As part of the work of this informal group, senior staff representatives of Brzezinski met weekly with representatives of the secretary of state and the DCI to review foreign developments or issues of current concern to the president and to provide feedback on intelligence coverage. These efforts had a salutary effect in improving communication between the intelligence community and the White House and improved intelligence support to the president.

A major innovation of the Reagan administration in this regard was the president's decision in 1981 that his President's Daily Brief should be provided each day also to the vice president, the secretaries of state and defense, the national security adviser, and later the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff. They all were to have the same information as the president. Most significantly, primarily for security reasons, the PDB was to be delivered to these principals in person by a senior analytical officer of the CIA, who would sit with the principal, then carry the document back to the CIA. These arrangements provided an opportunity unique in U.S. intelligence history for intelligence professionals to have immediate, informed feedback from principals—their follow-up questions, tasking for further collection and analysis, and a sense of the priorities and concerns of the top officials in the government. Intelligence support was thereby improved as was the understanding of intelligence officers of policy dynamics and reality of the decision-making arena which they were supporting.

The day-to-day dialogue between intelligence officers and policymakers at all levels has increased significantly in recent years. Intelligence officers have been more aggressive in this re-

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gard and policymakers more receptive. Routine weekly meetings between the DCI and, separately, the secretaries of state and defense and the national security adviser have contributed to improved relevance and timeliness of intelligence support. The NSC staff and several Reagan national security advisers worked with intelligence managers to improve responsiveness to presidential intelligence needs and to remedy shortcomings in intelligence support. With Reagan's encouragement, the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board studied substantive and bureaucratic problems in the intelligence community and offered recommendations for improvement.

In sum, the dialogue essential to better intelligence support has improved, but such progress is highly perishable with frequent turnover in senior policy officials. Moreover, this improved dialogue until recently focused primarily on current intelligence or crisis-related subjects. More can be done to institutionalize improved White House intelligence guidance policy, attention to requirements, investment, and dialogue on strategy and longer-range issues.

Overcoming White House Suspicion and CIA Isolation

Presidents expect their intelligence service to provide timely, accurate, and farseeing information and analysis. Thus, a high proportion of presidential comments on the quality of intelligence are critical—prompted by the failure of intelligence agencies to meet expectations. Indeed, all but one quote at the outset of this article was in response to a specific situation where intelligence was perceived to have failed to measure up. In short, presidents often consider intelligence as much another problem bureaucracy as a source of helpful information, insight, and support.

This point is perhaps most graphically illustrated by a story involving president Johnson. Former DCI Richard Helms recalls a private dinner in the White House family quarters during which president Johnson engaged John J. McCloy in a discussion about intelligence. He told McCloy things were going well in intelligence, but then continued:

> Let me tell you about these intelligence guys. When I was growing up in Texas, we had a cow named Bessie. I'd go out early and milk her. I'd get her in the stanchion, seat myself and squeeze out a pail of fresh milk. One day I'd worked hard and gotten a full pail of milk, but I wasn't paying attention, and old Bessie swung her shit-smeared tail through that bucket of milk. Now, you know, that's what these intelligence guys do. You work hard and get a good program or policy going, and they swing a shit-smeared tail through it.

The dynamics of the relationship between the White House and the CIA and the lack of understanding of each other's perspective and motives are usually difficult for the players themselves to discern. They are even less clear to outside observers. Although most journalists and academicians focus on alleged distortions of intelligence to support policy, the players know that the relationship actually is often characterized by disagreement on substance and suspicion of motives. To the extent intelligence professionals are isolated (or isolate themselves) from White House and NSC officials and are unresponsive to their information requirements or suggestions on strategy, this adversarial

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nature of the relationship will be emphasized.

Although the routine order of business and internal organization may vary from administration to administration, there are ways to improve this relationship and intelligence support to the President. The DCI with his senior managers and the president with his staff must both promote and maintain close personal ties at all levels. Both must aggressively seek new ways to inform intelligence officers about policy initiatives under consideration or underway in order to determine how intelligence can make a contribution and how best to put intelligence information and assessments before the president. There should be closer contact on questions of long-term intelligence strategy, investment, and performance.

The role of the DCI is central to understanding the president's needs and conveying analysis to him. DCI aggressiveness in putting substantive matters before the president (and DCI access to the president) has varied greatly, though. The DCI should work closely with the national security adviser—perhaps the best source of information on issues of topical interest to the president and the foreign affairs and defense agendas. Finally, feedback from the president and his national security team is critical. Contrary to the views of some, the CIA cannot properly do its work in splendid isolation—and should not. Timeliness, relevance, and objectivity are not incompatible.

The responsibility for making intelligence more relevant, timely, and helpful is not that of the DCI and senior officials of the intelligence community alone. The president and his senior national security team must take seriously their responsibility for the quality of intelligence support they get. They must be willing to make time for regular dialogue as to their intelligence requirements and for understanding intelligence capabilities, the impact of competing priorities for collection and analysis, and major investment decisions. They must be willing to play an active role in guiding intelligence strategy and determining priorities.

The above suggestions apply to improving the quality and usefulness of intelligence to the president. They will not remove the several causes of presidential displeasure—intelligence support to Congress, revised assessments that have policy implications, surprises, and politically disagreeable assessments. Even here mitigating steps can and have been taken. More can be done.

Intelligence professionals should take the initiative to let the national security adviser, the NSC staff, or a cabinet officer know when an estimate or other form of analysis will revise earlier assessments and have a significant impact on the president's policies. This would include, in particular, advance warning of new and important conclusions in military estimates. There is, of course, a risk that a policy official will try to change or stop publication of an unwelcome or embarrassing estimate. Here the DCI must and, this author is confident, will stand his ground to protect the integrity of the assessment and the process.

Intelligence needs to develop a mechanism for better informing the White House about support provided to the Congress. The intelligence agencies are part of the executive branch; the DCI is appointed by and reports to the president. It is not improper or inappropriate for the intelligence community to keep the president's foreign affairs and congressional affairs staff better and regularly ad-

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vised of papers provided to the Congress, as well as possibly controversial testimony or briefings. Keeping the executive informed about CIA dealings with Congress is an important aspect of building presidential confidence that the CIA is not trying to undercut him or his policies when responding to legitimate congressional requests.

Finally, ground rules should be developed for the disclosure of declassified intelligence. The long-standing absence of a systematic approach contributes to leaks; to White House suspicion of obstructionism, bureaucratic games, or pursuit of a contrary policy agenda by intelligence professionals; and concern on the part of intelligence officers over the appearance of politicization of intelligence by White House or other policymaker-directed declassification of information. Many in the executive branch and Congress agree that intelligence information undergirding major policy decisions must often be made available for public education or to gain support for national security decisions. There is widespread demand for unclassified publication of intelligence assessments or research on issues of moment to the country. Who should make these decisions? This is not the place to propose solutions, but the problem exists and it seriously affects the relationship between the president and the intelligence agencies on one hand and the executive and legislative branches on the other.

The usefulness of the CIA to presidents in that area for which the CIA was primarily established—collection, reporting, analysis, and production of information—at times has suffered because of self-imposed isolation by CIA and the frequent lack of time and often opportunity on the part of presidents and their national security teams to play a central role in developing intelligence policy and strategy.

The CIA and other U.S. intelligence agencies represent an important national asset. The rebuilding of the intelligence community over the past decade has vastly augmented the CIA's collection and analysis capabilities and sharpened its skills. The White House and the intelligence community, under the leadership of the DCI, need to build on past progress and intensify their efforts to ensure that intelligence strategy, investment, and policy are driven by a genuinely national perspective and requirements. Only thus can the two institutions seize the opportunity further to improve intelligence support to the president and, concomitantly, better serve the policy-making process.

Note

*This article addresses the CIA–White House relationship in terms of intelligence assessments and substantive support to the policy process. Although the CIA's involvement in operational activities abroad, especially covert action, plainly affects the relationship with the White House and the president, this article does not address that aspect. Although a complex and controversial subject warranting separate treatment, the operational-covert action element of the relationship does not significantly affect the analysis or conclusions of this article.

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